

Community Offices Update

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Purpose of the Report

To update Councillors on the yearly footfall / enquiry figures across the district and the results of the recent customer satisfaction survey.

Public Interest

South Somerset District Council (SSDC) has 6 community offices which enable the public to access a wide range of Council related information and other assistance. This supports the other ways of contacting SSDC, which is by phone or the website. This report gives an update of the number of customers who visit the offices and also includes results of the customer survey carried out in September 2015.

Recommendation

That Area East Committee members note the contents of this report.

Background

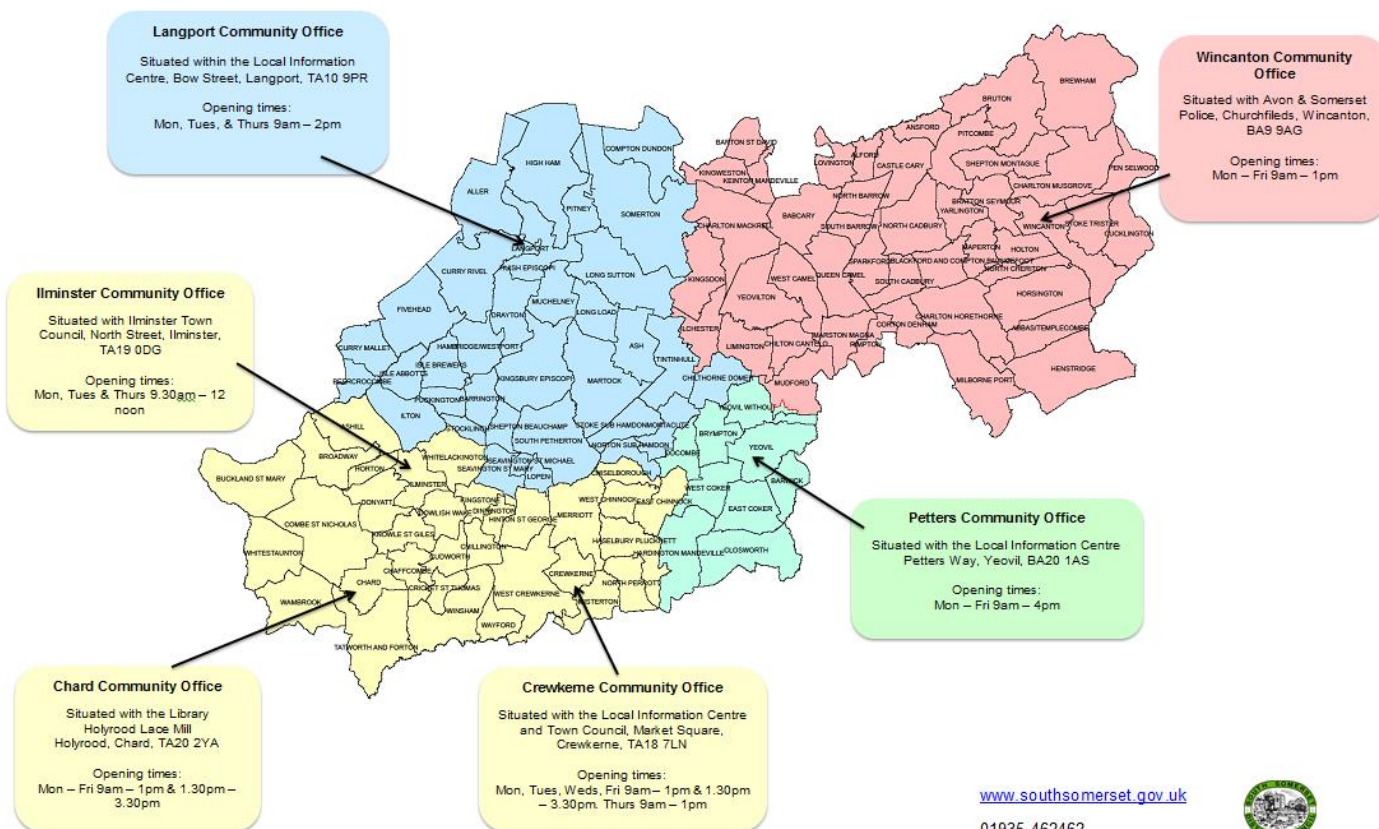
The community offices are located in Yeovil, Crewkerne, Chard, Ilminster, Langport and Wincanton and are managed by the Community Office Support Manager and Deputy Community Office Support Manager, reporting to the Assistant Director, Communities. There are 13 (9.5FTE) Community Support Assistants (CSA) across the team who provide customer access to services assistance at the 6 Community offices. They also provide administrative and project support to the Area Development teams.

The Community Offices

The main SSDC services that customers visit our offices are:

Housing and Council Tax Benefits	Receipt, verification and scanning of applications forms and evidence, general advice and guidance
Council Tax	Advice and guidance on moving in/out of area, discounts and exemptions and instalment plans, processing of payments (debit cards)
Homefinder (online social housing service)	Help with accessing the Homefinder service and weekly bidding process
Waste and Recycling	Advice on collection days, missed collection reports, ordering of new/replacement bins, payment of garden waste bins/bags
StreetScene	Report litter, fly tipping, dead animals, discarded needles, dangerous and stray dogs, dog fouling and graffiti
Community Protection	Report pest problems (rats, wasps, insects)
Horticulture	Report problems with shrub / tree / hedge maintenance
Planning/Building Control	Hand out application forms
Community Safety	Recording incidents

SSDC Community Offices



Not all offices have exactly the same facilities either due to location or number of customers.

- Cash machines are available in Petters Way and Chard. Customers can make payments for council tax, parking fines, planning and building control applications.
- There is free public computers and phone access in Petters, Chard, Crewkerne & Wincanton allowing customers to access online services through self-service or assisted self-service.
- All offices are co-located with other authorities / agencies.
- All front offices have a hearing loop.
- All offices are fully accessible, except for Ilminster where it hasn't been possible to fully adapt.

The community offices provide face to face service and enables customers to receive advice and assistance to many SSDC services, as well as the ability to signpost to other agencies where necessary. They ensure vulnerable members of the community and those who find it difficult or unable to contact the council by other means are able to fully access our services.

As well as the community offices customers are also able to access SSDC services over the phone and/or via the SSDC website. There are a number of services now available online; completing applications, various payment options, reporting issues (including

missed waste and recycling collections) and registering to vote. Homefinder applications can only normally be done via the internet.

All CSAs are trained to deal with the wide range of front office enquiries and are able to cover any community office ensuring that full opening hours are maintained across the district. Generally there is only one member of staff on the front desk, but back up support is provided in the busier offices to help reduce customer waiting time.

The Community Support team have access to the online referral system which enables them to refer customers as appropriate to the Welfare Benefits team and outside agencies such as CAB, SSVCA. The Welfare Benefits Advisors provide support and advice to many of the visitors to the front office and work closely with the Community Support team to raise awareness of the benefits that they may be entitled to.

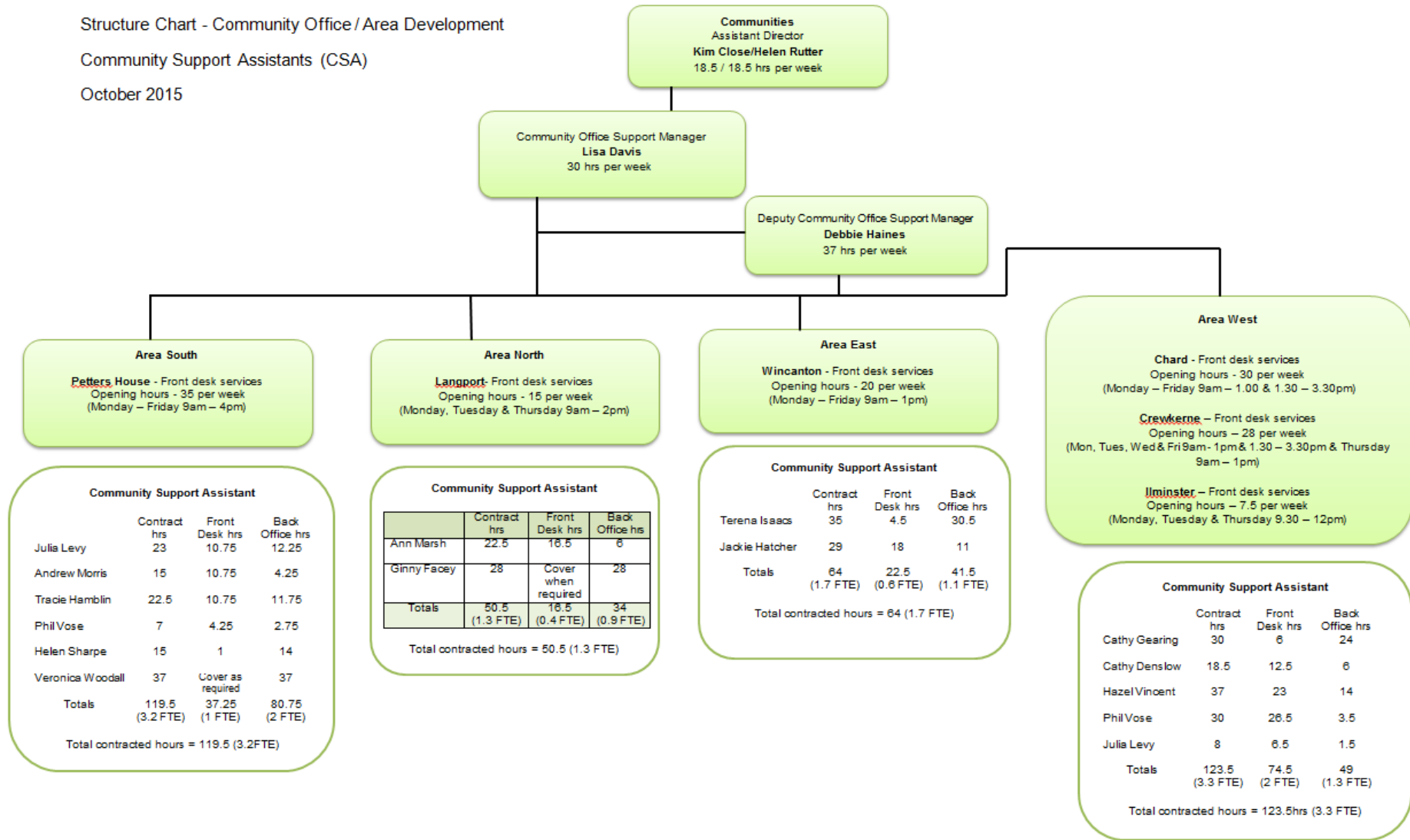
The complexity of enquiries at the front office can vary please see Appendix 1 for case studies.

The following structure chart shows the current level of staffing for each area

Structure Chart - Community Office / Area Development

Community Support Assistants (CSA)

October 2015

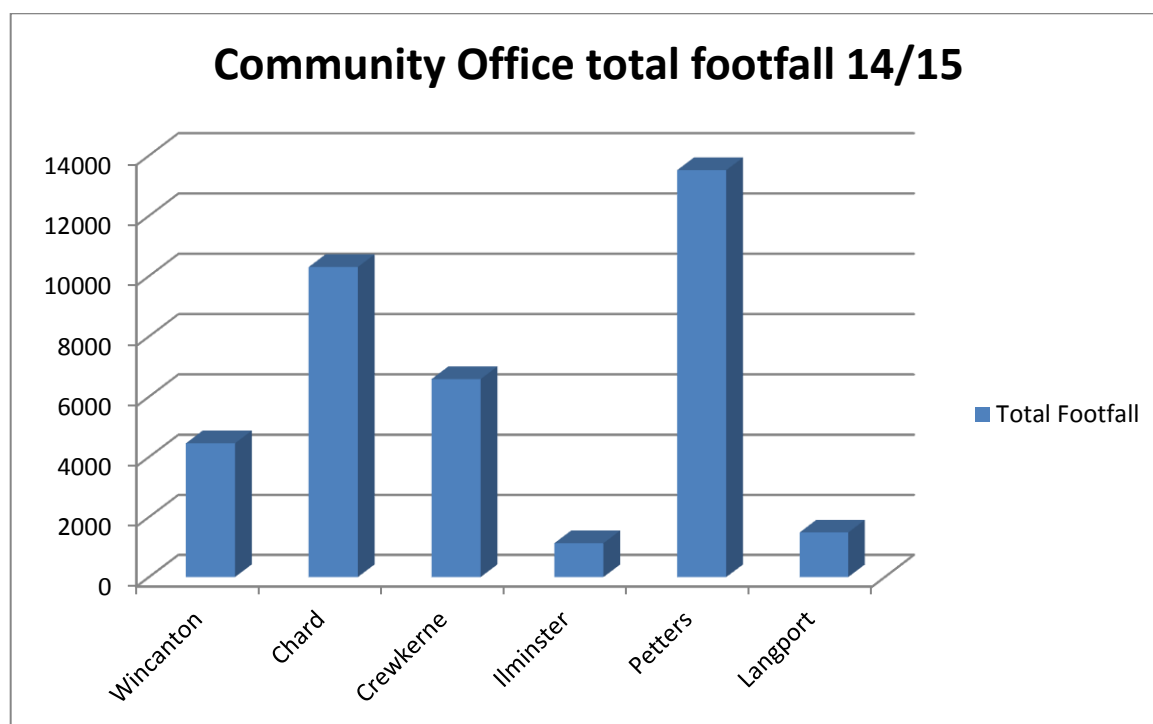


Footfall figures (Number of customers visiting the Community Offices)

Total footfall comparisons for all Community Offices from April 2012 - April 2015

All SSDC Community Offices	12-13	13-14	% change from previous year	14-15	% change in footfall 13/14 - 14/15
Benefits	18561	15345	-17%	13560	-12%
Council Tax	4270	4282	0.3%	4250	-0.7%
Housing & Homelessness	3450	2608	-24%	2306	-12%
Refuse & Recycling	1882	1411	-25%	1469	4%
*Core services total	28163	23646	-16%	21585	-9%
Other SSDC enquiries	5768	4067	-29%	4206	3%
Non SSDC enquiries	10522	8102	-23%	6832	-16%
Reception duties	8462	6189	-27%	4848	-22%
Total Footfall	52915	42004	-21%	37471	-11%

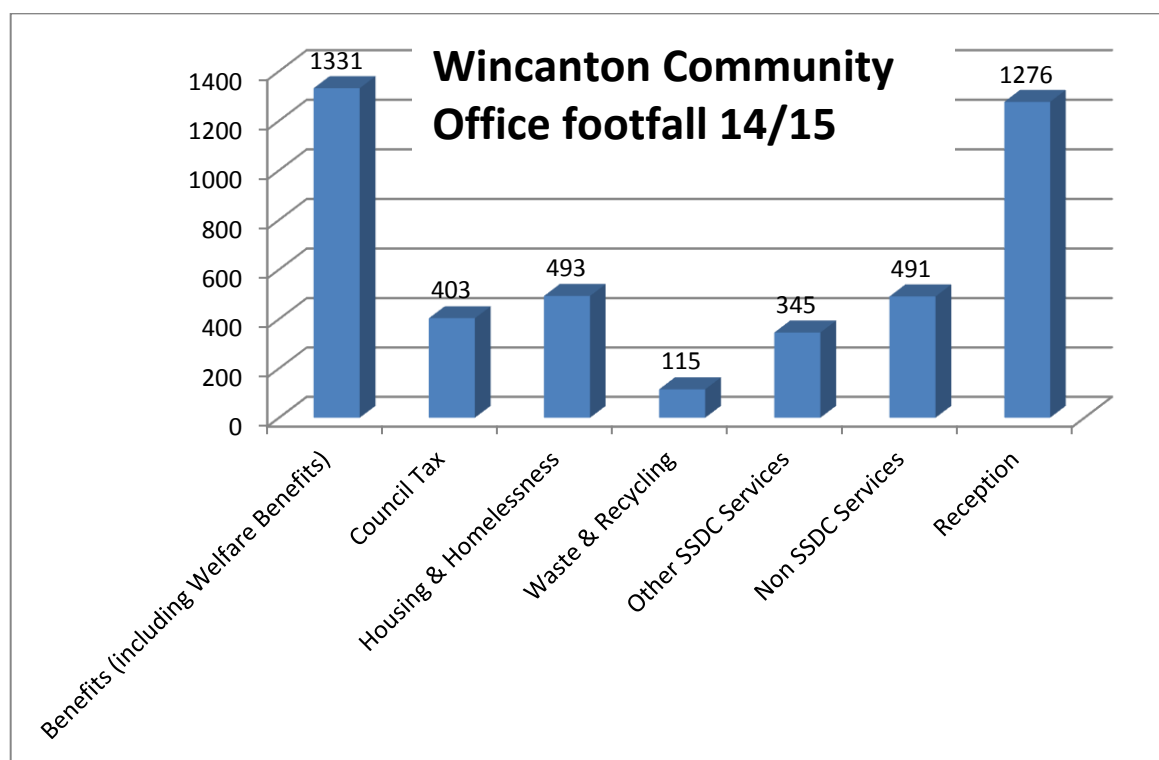
*Core services relate to Benefits, Council Tax, Housing & Homelessness and Refuse & Recycling



Total footfall comparisons for Wincanton from April 2012 - April 2015

Wincanton	12-13	13-14	% change from 12-13 to 13-14	14-15	% change from 13-14 to 14-15
Benefits	1856	1465	-21%	1305	-11%
Council Tax	568	509	-10%	403	-21%
Housing & Homelessness	438	335	-24%	493	47%
Refuse & Recycling	172	122	-29%	115	-6%
Total core services	3034	2431	-20%	2316	-5%
Other SSDC enquiries	645	378	-41%	371	-2%
Non SSDC enquiries	1159	759	-35%	491	-35%
Reception duties	1609	1549	-4%	1276	-18%
Total Footfall	6447	5117	-21%	4454	-13%

Although footfall has reduced from the previous year the decline is not as significant. It should be noted that whilst increasing numbers of the public are accessing services via the website or telephone the residual enquiries tend to be from more vulnerable people many of whom have complex enquiries which take longer to deal with.



The highest proportion of work undertaken by the CSAs in Wincanton front office relates to Benefit enquiries. This is receiving and processing benefit applications forms, evidence and other enquiries. 29% of the enquiries relate to reception duties, this is mainly due to the meeting rooms at Churchfield being used regularly by SSDC departments and also external agencies such as Somerset County Council and Environment Agency.

It should be noted that the non SSDC enquiries include bus pass enquiries/issue of forms, Town Council and SCC enquiries and any other enquiries that fall outside of SSDC's remit. We also provide a reception service for visitors to the building.

Visitors to Churchfield when the SSDC front office is closed but the Police enquiry office is open are able to access SSDC services using the public phone on the front desk and can also access services online using the public computer. We do not have any details relating to the number of calls made outside of SSDC front office opening hours.

A Planning Officer is available at Churchfield every Monday morning, during the period April 2014 – March 2015, 70 planning enquiries were dealt with during the drop in sessions.

Avon and Somerset Police are co-located with SSDC at Churchfield and there has been a recent move to achieve a shared reception desk. The Police only record footfall for the first 7 days of the month and not every day that they are open for business, during the period April 2014 – March 2015, 502 enquiries were recorded at the Police front desk.

The Area East Development Team support the Local Information Centre's (LIC) in Wincanton, Castle Cary and Bruton. There is a Service Level Agreement in place with each of the LIC's and an annual review is carried out with each LIC in addition to three visits per year to ensure that all information is updated and deal with any queries.

Customer Survey

A customer satisfaction survey is carried out every year and was compiled in September 2015 in all of the community offices and 467 responses were received.

Customer age group analysis

16-29	27%
30-44	26%
45-59	22%
60-74	18%
75+	7%

The team once again received a 99% satisfaction score of Good or Very Good relating to the overall service received.

Out of 458 responses 449 customers rated the waiting time before being seen as Good (95) or Very Good (354).

Out of 455 responses 448 customers rated the knowledge of the staff as Good (81) or Very Good (367)

98% of customers said that the CSA had been able to provide the information or help that was needed with the other 2% of customers being referred to another agency.

Comments received from customers on help provided:

“Excellent, brilliant, superb”
“Very helpful and nice to speak to”
“Very helpful”
“Very helpful, friendly”

Customers were also asked why they had chosen to call at the office rather than using another office, phone us or use our website.

79% of customers said the offices was near to their home with 6% saying they found it easier to communicate face to face due to speech, hearing or language problems.

Comments received from customers on why the use the offices:

“I am not confident using a computer of do not know how to access the website on my phone”
“Couldn’t get through to Yeovil by phone”
“Misunderstanding, easier to understand in Person”
“Find it easier to communicate face to face”
“Prefer to deal face to face when providing evidence”

The results for Wincanton show that 1% of customers completing the survey would find it very difficult to get to another office, 7% are not confident or do not have access to a pc or website access on a phone and find it easier to communicate face to face due to speech, hearing or language problems. This highlights the importance of local offices for the more vulnerable residents who are unable or find it difficult to contact SSDC online or by phone or who would be unable to access a central office. 94% of customers received the information or help that they needed whilst visiting Wincanton, with 6% being referred to another agency.

Future development

We will continue to promote the Community Offices and the services that are provided through leaflets, Town and Parish Councils, Area East Bulletin, SSDC website and other methods as appropriate.

Financial Implications

None arising directly from this report.

Council Plan Implications

Focus on Health and Communities. Continue to provide Welfare Benefits support and advice to tackle poverty for our vulnerable residents.

Carbon Emissions and Climate Change Implications

Reduce carbon emissions by increasing awareness of local offices and use of alternative methods of contact i.e. online transactions

Equality and Diversity Implications

All front desk services are accessible, except our Ilminster office, which can only be improved if suitable premises can be found.

Background Papers

None

Appendix 1 - Enquiry examples

Example 1

A non-English speaking lady came to the office and was accompanied by a friend to translate but despite this there were still language barriers.

The lady in question had previously failed to pay her Council Tax and therefore received a summons which had been passed to Ross & Roberts (SSDC debt collectors). The lady had then at this point fulfilled her repayments and the account was cleared.

The lady then received another bill from Ross & Roberts for the same amount and was confused and very upset. Having compared the bills, everything was identical except for a variance on the surname.

I tried to explain to her friend how the error had occurred and reassured them both that nothing was owed but because of the language barrier it was quite difficult for them to understand.

I contacted Council Tax who confirmed the error and said they would get in touch with Ross & Roberts.

I also checked current liability to ensure everything was up to date.

This whole process took about half an hour to resolve but I did manage to reassure the lady that it would be dealt with and she went away happy.

Example 2

A recently widowed lady brought in details of her husband's small private pension. She was hard of hearing and found it difficult to use the phone.

She asked if I could ring and pass on the details, including her email address and mobile phone and explain to them that any communication would have to be done via email or text message if they needed any more information.

Whilst she was in the office I was able to request Single Person Discount with Council Tax, plus knowing that she was in receipt of benefits I explained that she may be able to get help with the funeral costs. I printed and helped her fill in the application form from the Gov.uk website, including a note explaining that she was hard of hearing and could only deal with communication via email or text message.

I also assisted with her moving – i.e. arranging for her garden bin to be removed, processing the move on our systems and reminding her to take final readings on electricity and gas meters etc.

She was very grateful for all the assistance given, saying that she felt comfortable coming in the office.
